Interview with Marcuse

This interview first appeared in Der Spiegel on July 28, 1969 under the title Revolution out of Disgust. It began with the following editorial note: Herbert Marcuse is the only philosopher of his generation who unconditionally embraces the protest movement of the students; his "concrete philosophy," influenced by Freud and Heidegger, tries to adapt Marx's theory of revolution to modern industrial society. Member of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Studies, Marcuse, born in Berlin, the son of a merchant, migrated to the USA in 1934 and now teaches philosophy at San Diego, California. "No anarchist", as this 71 year old states, but an opponent of orthodox party bureaucracies, he recently had to defend himself against the accusation of being an agent of the CIA. Now 16 representatives of the New Left, among them Rudi Dutschke, Oskar Negt, Erich Fried and Klaus Meschkat, have expressed their solidarity with him against such "revival of Stalinist practices."1

SPIEGEL: Professor Marcuse, you are one of the fathers of the New Left, which in part now revolts against you. What have you to say about that?

MARCUSE: I reject the father or grandfather nonsense. I am neither the father nor the grandfather of the New Left. It is true that a large degree of coincidence has arisen between my ideas and the experiences which students drew independently from their practice and from their thinking. I am very happy about this harmony. I do not know how far it goes. But there is no paternal or patriarchal relationship, as can be seen for instance in the fact that I have not personally known a single French student who played a role in the May and June actions.

S.: But the fact remains that, after a period of temporary harmony between you and the student movement, differences have arisen.

M.: The difference concerns essentially two points, first the relationship of the New Left to traditional bourgeois culture, and secondly the possibility of carrying theory into practice.

S.: Turning to the second point: You have said that philosophy must culminate in action. Has your philosophy already established this link with practice?

M.: I wouldn't claim that. But I am of the opinion that today the theoretician — and I am speaking of the Marxist theoretician — participates in practice at least to the extent that he takes a clear position on political questions, that he participates in demonstrations and in certain cases in the occupation of buildings, etc.
S.: Then you would not share the reservations which Theodor W. Adorno has in this matter?

M.: No. I see the difference between Adorno and the Horkheim group on the one hand and myself on the other that for me today the inner content of the theory itself requires a practical taking of position, or to put it another way, that the content itself is falsified if such a taking of position does not result. The concept of mediations must not be used as an excuse.

S.: If you place so much value on the unity of theory and practice, one would have thought that you would be proud of the proffered father role.

M.: I believe I can tell you why I reject this role. I would very much like to be the father of the New Left, if this father role did not include an authority which is more or less readily accepted by the children. This very authoritarian-paternalistic position is repugnant to me.

S.: In the present situation could this not be taken as a separation from the student movement?

M.: You must not in any way construct out of my rejection of the father or grandfather role a rejection of the student movement as such. There are certainly things in the movement with which I would not like to identify in any way. But the movement as such I consider today in the developed industrial countries as the perhaps most important, if not the only, chance of a future radical transformation . . .

S.: . . . of a revolution?

M.: We are not in a revolutionary, perhaps not even in a pre-revolutionary situation. Under these conditions, the only oppor-
tunity can be preparatory work, preparatory work however, which is today immensely more difficult and immensely more important than previously. And it is just in relation to this preparatory work that I speak of the opportunities of the New Left.

S.: You have said that the students are "voices", which express the "needs and desires of the silent masses," but they are not revolutionaries. Do you think that the student movement provides a real possibility of a change of consciousness?

M.: Yes, a change of consciousness and feeling, which today is the pre-condition for radical social change.

S.: And do you believe that this change is connected with militant and aggressive actions?

M.: We would have to come to an agreement as to what we mean by militant and particularly what we mean by aggressive.

S.: You yourself have said that students — to the extent that they use violence — are on the defensive, that their method of using violence is only a reply to the violence of society.

M.: I would go even further today. I hesitate more and more to use the concept of violence or the word "violence" to describe what the students are doing. If you look at the actions of the two sides at Berkeley for instance, but not only there, it is most questionable whether the throwing of tomatoes and eggs and the breaking down of doors can really be described as violence; I would call it defensive . . .

S.: . . . in comparison with the violence used by the authorities?

M.: Yes, with helicopters, gas grenades, small shot, batons and all that.

S.: Mr. Marcuse, you have said the philosopher today must participate in demonstrations, perhaps even in the occupation of institutions . . .


S.: Did you yourself take part in such occupations of buildings?

M.: Yes.

S.: Could you give us more details?

M.: It was in connection with the founding of a College for Problems of the Oppressed Racial and National Minorities in San Diego — the Lumumba-Zapata College — which was to be directed by Negroes and Mexicans. To win their demands, they occupied,
together with leftist white students, the offices of the University treasurer. During the demonstration in which I took part, a door was broken down. That was the only act of violence which occurred and I immediately declared that I was ready to pay for the replacement of the door. I would not call this participation in any radical practice. But that is what I mean by taking of position which is more than the theoretical taking of position.

S.: . . . but action for the realization of a demand?

M.: In this case everyone knew why the office was occupied. But you have to make this aim comprehensible to groups apart from the demonstrators. If you don’t do this, then such a demonstration appears completely irrational and as a provocation.

S.: Do you believe that so-called individual terror also has a role to play in the practice of protest, as happened for instance in the occupation of the house of Mr. Roehl, the editor and publisher of “Konkret”?

M.: What actually happened?

S.: Some furniture was thrown out, the telephone cables were cut and they urinated into his bed.

M.: I find that objectionable. That has nothing to do with either the old or the new Left. Similarly with the burning of books or the use of violence against people who do not themselves use violence.

S.: Do you believe that the opportunities of the protest movement have improved or deteriorated since its beginning in the mid-60’s?

M.: The opportunities have improved. As against most people, I believe that the May-June movement in France was no defeat. It has in no way been cancelled out in the course of later developments. It is true that a back-lash occurred, which was to be expected. But I would say without exaggeration, that capitalism no longer is what it was before the May-June movement; because for the first time forms and methods of opposition were taken up again, which had been forgotten and suppressed in the tradition of the left, for instance, spontaneous control, spontaneous organisation, if necessary even against the established trade unions and parties of the left.

S.: Didn’t you previously have a different opinion of the connection between the student movement and the workers? Ernst Bloch has in any case specifically welcomed the fact that you no longer “assume the sectarian division between the intelligentsia and the proletariat.” Have you had to correct your views?
M.: I don't think so. I have never maintained that the student movement as such is a revolutionary movement. Also I have never claimed that a radical social transformation is possible without a mass basis. The problem is under what conditions the workers can provide such a mass basis.

S.: Nevertheless in a previous Spiegel interview you stated: "Why should the present-day proletariat be the class from which salvation will come?"

M.: I admit that this was a rather impertinent formulation, behind which however is hidden the thought that the Marxian proletariat no longer exists in the developed industrial countries, and that the role which Marx ascribed to the proletariat of that time cannot simply be transferred to the working class of these countries. But here we come to the decisive question: Who are the workers? The working class itself has changed in the conditions of late capitalist society. The technisation of the working class is a very well-known fact: the constant growth in the number of highly qualified employees, engineers, specialists, scientists, and the relative decline of the so-called blue-collar workers.

S.: Does this mean that the working-class is becoming more bourgeois?

M.: That is the crux: Whether it is becoming more bourgeois. In the United States, yes; in Germany — from what I hear — in its majority also; much less in France and even less in Italy. The structural change of the working class however has a dual tendency, a positive one and a negative one. From the point of view of revolution, negative because of what you have just called "becoming more bourgeois", i.e. a stronger integration in bourgeois society. Positive in that new sections of the population, — the technical intelligentsia — can become radical potentials, and that to the extent to which they become aware of the contradiction between the deciding role of the technical intelligentsia in the production process and its lack of power in relation to all vital general social questions.

S.: Couldn't this mean that society is reforming itself from within, rather than a revolutionary process developing?

M.: Yes, but don't forget I'm still a Marxist and therefore believe that there is a point where no reforms work any more and where no reform can remove or even suspend the essential internal contradiction of the capitalist system. I believe that this internal contradiction — its most general form is the ever more obvious conflict between the immense social wealth on the one hand and its atrocious repressive use on the other — that this contradiction is really insoluble within the capitalist system, despite all reforms.
S.: Does this explain the necessity for the "great refusal" of which you have spoken — the refusal to collaborate in the institutions of this society?

M.: First of all, the "great refusal" must not be understood as an abstract rejection of the whole of bourgeois culture, if for no other reason than that such a rejection is impossible. Even the most radical refuser is always still in a definable sense heir to bourgeois culture, even in its negation. Many of his concepts, much of his rationality and sensibility arise from the radical-critical bourgeois tradition. Even when we work against bourgeois culture, we still work within bourgeois culture.

S.: That applies also to Cohn-Bendit, when he makes a film with Godart, appears on bourgeois television or when he sells his book to the Rowohlt-Publishing House.

M.: In any case I would not reproach him for these things as he reproached me for having "spoken in a bourgeois theatre" or for having chosen "a bourgeois communications medium". I am of the opinion that it isn't important from what geographical place you speak, but only what you say. I am in agreement with Cohn-Bendit — I would like to stress this — that it was too expensive. I would have much preferred to speak at another place. But neither the Communist Party nor the trade unions, nor the student movement in Italy invited me.

S.: You have used a bourgeois institution. What do you think of attempts to found counter-institutions? In Berlin the "critical university" was a first step in that direction.

M.: A radical change in the structure of the university is indeed one of main demands of the New Left. In the universities and the schools a decisive section of the future working-class is being trained — the technical intelligentsia which will occupy even more key positions in the production process. The politisation of this intelligentsia is an urgent task.

S.: But this change in the structure of the university doesn't mean its destruction?

M.: No. I have repeatedly rejected the aim of the destruction of the University. It is another instance of where an institution of bourgeois culture may be used to prepare a radical change of thinking and even of practice. As far as I know, it was Noam Chomsky who said that according to the logic of absolute destruction Marx would have burnt down the British Museum instead of working there.

S.: A subversive practice in the existing society then?

M.: In existing society, but not for this society. I would like to
remind you of a Marxian concept, namely the description of the proletariat as a class in this society, but not of this society.

S.: Do you see organisational forms of the New Left, which are suitable to this task and the further aims?

M.: This question can only be answered in connection with concrete practice. In general one may say: The New Left must find forms of organisation which correspond to and contradict the new forms of neo-capitalist organisation and repression. In any case it has been shown that the traditional forms of a more or less centralised and bureaucratised mass party and trade union have been overtaken by the development of capitalism.

S.: Nevertheless you have pointed out that it is impossible to succeed against a society "which is mobilised and organised with its whole totality against every revolutionary movement" without a tighter form of organisation than has existed hitherto.

M.: That is right, but a tighter form of organisation doesn't at all mean the old forms of a centralized and bureaucratized mass party. For we have unfortunately learnt that when it really matters such a form of organisation can be rendered harmless within twenty-four hours. We have seen that already in 1933. What I mean by tighter forms of organisation are extremely flexible, changeable methods of co-operation, which articulate the initiative from below and are able to achieve definite political aims. That is, from spontaneity forms of organisation must arise, which then on their part are able to influence spontaneity again and direct it in a decided direction, which leads beyond the particular motive and the particular object in view.

S.: Could you quote an instance of such concrete forms of organisation of the New Left.

M.: I think of Hannover. What happened there looks at first like a very unimportant non-political, very reformist aim and accordingly an unimportant mobilisation. But exactly the opposite is the case. Here the immediate motive stands in a visible connection with the aim to show the whole irrationality, the whole corruption and repression of the capitalist system, concentrated in the ordered increase in tramway fares. At the same time this action led to a solidarity which went beyond the students and school pupils and gripped not only sections of the workers but also the bourgeoisie. I point to the system of red points which suddenly linked car owners with the striking and blockading students, pupils and workers. The "Rote Presse Korrespondenz" gives an excellent analysis of this action.
S.: In which way is that a model for the organisational form of the protest movement?

M.: Insofar as it was shown that spontaneity must be organised in detail, to become politically effective.

S.: Can you see other such examples?

M.: Yes, there is the great strike at the Pirelli Works. According to the reports I have read, an organisational form developed there which is new and really revolutionary, namely the control of production by the workers, the organisation of production by the workers themselves. The amazing thing is not only that the enterprise continued to function, although the workers themselves reduced their piece and time rates, but that it occurred to a large extent with the assistance of young, by no means highly qualified, workers, who had only recently come from the south of Italy to work in the industrial north. This strike showed that the whole complicated hierarchy of the modern factory system is officious, that is that it can be replaced in the shortest time by the self-organisation of the producers.

S.: Paris, Pirelli and Hannover — you claim then that the barriers between the student movement and the workers are coming down?

M.: They can at least be opened for definite groups and in definite spheres; particularly in Italy, to a lesser extent in France, perhaps less in Germany and certainly to the least extent in the United States.

S.: You consider the "long march through the institutions" quoted by Dutschke — a period of some decades — as necessary?

M.: Absolutely necessary. Foreshortenings may always occur but one of the greatest errors would be to underestimate the power, the might of the neo-capitalist system.

S.: Is this power not underestimated particularly by allotting a prominent role to the intellectuals in the transformation of society? You, Professor Marcuse, have been accused of separating the student movement from the workers.

M.: What nonsense — as though I could separate what is linked in social reality! I don't believe at all that stressing the role of the student movement represents an underestimation of the power of the capitalist system. On the contrary, I repeat, this system is not in a revolutionary situation. Under these conditions the task is a preparatory one, namely the stirring of the consciousness about what is done not only to the working class, but to all sections of the population with the exception of the ruling-class.
As for the splitting of the student movement from the workers’ movement, first of all a counter-question: Which workers’ movement? In the United States a political workers’ movement doesn’t exist at all. In other countries, not I or any theory has divided the student movement from the workers’ movement, but the workers’ movement itself developed in a direction which rendered it completely incapable of struggling against the contradictions rending capitalism. The reformist-economist policy of collaboration, as it has been pursued by the trade unions and the Soviet-orientated communist parties played into the hands of the interests of capitalism . . .

S.: . . . what others claim you have done. A certain Mr. Matthias for instance named you as a CIA agent.

M.: I am convinced that this rubbish is spread by bankrupt persons and groups of the old left, who avoid argumentation and therefore try to devalue or to discredit by slander the ideas, certainly very painful to them, which I discuss. The slanders are also not directed at me, but are aimed at discrediting the New Left and particularly the student movement.

S.: You have stated that a new human quality, a “new sensibility” is already visible in the existing protest movement. What do you mean?

M.: I believe that the concept of the new sensibility takes up again a central concept of Marxian theory, namely that the socialist revolution can be brought about only by a class whose needs and interests are no longer those of class society, that is a class which represents a new type of man and a radical revaluation of all values. I believe that beginnings of this revaluation, and this on a very deep basis, exist in the young generation and particularly among the militant students.

S.: Do you mean to say that a revolution arises not out of economic crises, but through a change of consciousness, a kind of cultural revolution? Is not that an un-Marxist thought?

M.: This accusation ignores completely the inner connection between the philosophical concepts of the young Marx and his later economic theory. I believe you can’t understand at all his conception of socialism if you don’t see that by the revolution man is to be liberated to his innermost sensual-physiological constitution. If the necessary change in production relations and the method of production, which remains a basic condition, is not carried out by such a new man, then the very thing will occur which
Marx once described with the expression: Then the old shit will start again.

The working class is a revolutionary class to the extent to which it is not caught in this system of needs of capitalist society. The more the working class is caught in this system, the more the statement applies once more that “class consciousness (can) be brought to the working class only from the outside”. (Lenin). This possibility of the development of consciousness lies today in the non-integrated sections of the population, particularly among the young workers and the militant students. Only a working class free of the capitalist system can take over the revolutionary initiative. Such freedom exists in the countries which are victims of imperialism. There naked exploitation and naked oppression are the motor of revolution.

S.: Do you see beginnings of these new people and these new needs in the protest movement?

M.: Yes, I see beginnings there. I have tried to describe these in my book Essay on Liberation. But I would like to point to something which speaks for the arising of new values in the protest movement. And I am well aware that I shall be accused enthusiastically of being ridiculous. It seems to me to be no coincidence that in the case of two representative demonstrations of the student movement in the United States which were met by the most violent reaction, the issue was a park, namely last year in Columbia University and in May this year in Berkeley. We should at least get used to the idea that we have to confront the conception, which is almost inconceivable to the old left, that revolution, if at all, will most probably not arise in the technically most developed capitalist countries from misery and poverty, but, this is at present hard to formulate, from what?

S.: From the affluent society?

M.: . . . From an unbearable disgust with the way and means in which the so-called consumer society misuses and wastes social wealth, while it intensively continues to foster poverty and oppression outside the metropolitan countries. Such a disgust is no psychological factor, but a radical political reaction, which tends according to its own strength towards denial and then to rebellion.

S.: Professor Marcuse, we thank you for this interview.

Translated from the German by Henry Zimmermann